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CHINA'S MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

By C. LEWIS HIND

SOMETIMES, in atavistic mood, when the load of the war has been momentarily lifted, I write a letter to a friend, shaping it as beautifully as I can, giving symmetry and right proportion to the page, even decorating it with such symbols and foliations as my poor skill will permit. Occasionally a prose verse will creep into the letter, such as the following which runs down the side, in beautiful script, of a Chinese hanging picture, showing birds in a blue sky above a misty river.

To the south of the river the mists rise.

The birds follow the sun and eat the wild rice
among the spreading reeds.

They drink, and croon, and fly.

And sometimes I go on a Sunday morning to a room on a top floor of one of New York's sky-stretching buildings, where a few are gathered together; the essence of the hour's meeting is meditation. A theme is given and each person relaxes from the world, exiles it away, and meditates.

Why?

Why do I write decorative letters and ascend in an elevator to join a few strangers in meditating on the Eternal Verities?

Because, the Present being a whirl of discords, it is salutary to swing back to the Past, and to me there is no past so harmonious, so inspiring, so sedative, and so consolatory (it would take too long to explain why) as that chunk of the world called China—so patient, so persistent in art and ethics, that, like India, in spite of lapses, has pursued the spiritual and ignored the material, from that misty, semi-mythical period some 2,500 years before

Christ, when Huang-ti and Shun reigned, and became the founders of the ceramic arts. Step forward some 2,000 years from this date, to somewhere around 200 B. C., and you may have the vision of Meng Tien, who built the Great Wall of China, spending his leisure time, presumably sitting in the shade of the Great Wall, inventing the writing-brush, and so unconsciously founding the pictorial art of China. For painting sprang from calligraphy, and calligraphy has never quite lost its hold on painting. The signature of the artist, a snatch of verse, an apophthegm, still play their part in Chinese paintings. In the early days the flying bird or the darting fish was merely an accessory to the beautiful script in which the Chinese artist, who was also a man of letters, standing before a red table, wrote letter or poem so beautifully that they became pictures.

Now you understand why I, discarding the disharmony of the Present, strive to relate myself to the immemorial harmony of China; why I pitch the typewriter away, and try to make the letter that I write to my banker or my wife, a work of art, or at least something that would not be utterly spurned by a grave and wise B. C. Chinaman.

Equally simple is the explanation of my interest in the Sunday morning meditation. When I close my eyes and reflect on the oneness of God I become a link in the chain which circles back to Daruma, who came from India to China about 550 A. D., and founded the Zen sect of Buddhism. I become one with Lao Tzu, who founded Taoism and showed the Way; I

become one with the innumerable sages who sit meditating, tiny, significant spots in the Landscape Rolls that have been preserved so carefully through the centuries, some so precious that a connoisseur would fast three days before unrolling the treasure; I become one with the battered and beautiful statues of Bodhisattvas, Buddha's elect, who sit smiling at the folly of the world, smiling at their own thoughts, or at the glimpse they win of Reality, the smile becoming fainter, but more subtle, as they approach nearer to ultimate Knowledge. They gaze at us from the past; they follow the eternal quest; they relate art to life.

That past of art is so vast that one flounders in it unless method, precise as a card-index, is adopted; or unless art is humanised, and related to the life we know, in which we live, move, learn and unlearn.

Who, wandering through an immense museum, in which treasures are stored in bewildering and tiring variety, has not longed to relate something from the past to something in the present, so that the choked memory might retain definite and natural data—a base to work from in future studies of brief delight? Sometimes this plan is tried with success. A man has been known to take an interest in Chinese art because a stone carving of a Bodhisattva he once saw in a museum was like his Aunt Jane. Another was launched on a successful career as an architect because, as a youth, he read somewhere that the meaning of the Hebrew word Bezaleel (the chief architect of the tabernacle, Exodus xxxi) is "in the shadow or protection of God."

Consider China—the huge, the mysterious, the quiescent, the unboastful. During the past decade or so those who are interested in such matters have seen wonderful specimens of statuary, and drawings

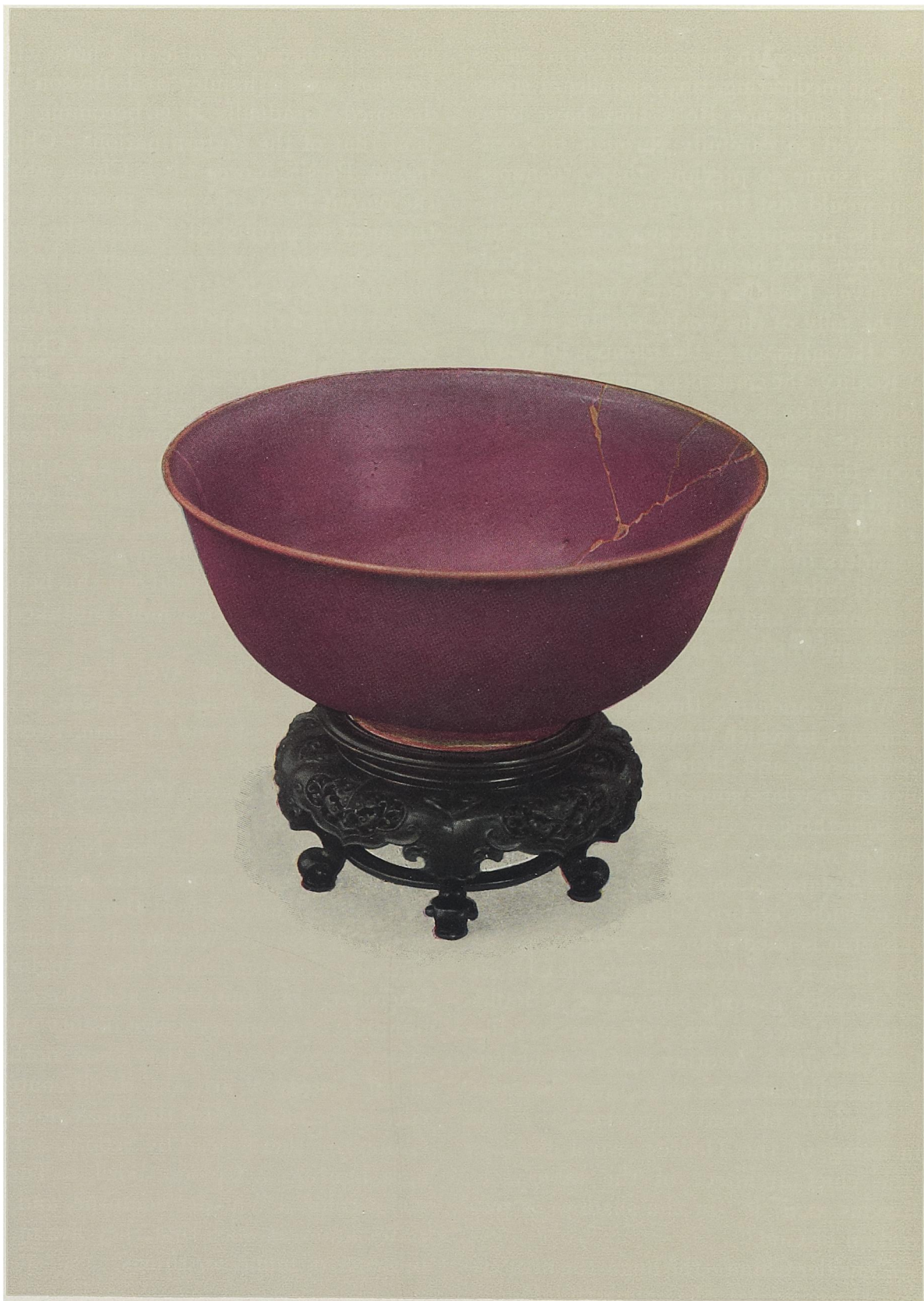
flushed with color, made in China when London was a hamlet and Boston undreamed. Gradually it is becoming evident that of the eastern nations—China, Japan, Persia, Korea—it is China who is the parent in art, the most inventive and the most accomplished—China, the huge, the mysterious, the quiescent, the unboastful.

But what a trip and a trap to the Anglo-Saxon are Chinese history and Chinese nomenclature. To us their words are as unemotional as numbers; the names of their dynasties have as much significance as the exhaust explosion of an automobile. To the student they are of course fraught with meaning. Said a learned collector to an enquirer: "I suppose, my dear sir, in England you would call this beaker T'ang. You were never more mistaken in your life. It's Sung."

Ming, Sung, T'ang, Wei, Han, back to the beginnings of pottery in China, to the reigns of Huang-ti and of Shun, twenty-five hundred years B. C.—this vast field of knowledge is known intimately to perhaps a score of men scattered through Paris, London, Boston, and New York; to the rest of the world it is a land uncharted and unexplored. But art is art, beauty is beauty, whether it is born in Cathay, Constantinople, East Anglia or Cherokee, Ia. Initiates, and there are numbers of them, recognize beauty wherever it occurs, even if they know nothing of the history of art, and dwell contentedly in the palmy days that have no date. Group together a head by Scopas, a Tanagra figurine, a Chinese bowl, a Turner water-color, a Whistler nocturne, and initiates know at once that they are in the presence of immortal things.

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Thoughts such as these flitted through my mind as I paused on the curb of Fifth Avenue, repeating to myself the injunc-



Courtesy of Parish-Watson & Co., New York

LARGE BOWL, OF IMPERIAL CHÜN WARE
SUNG DYNASTY

tion—"Stop, Look and Listen!" I was on the way to see certain things rare, precious and unique that I had never seen before, that I will probably never see again; I was bound for the establishment of a connoisseur and collector of Chinese earthenware and porcelain; I was to be shown specimens that are ranked among the rarest in the world; and I said to myself: "Shall I have the luck to be able to relate what I see to actual life, so that my particular choice among all I am shown will be fixed beautifully in my memory by the unwritten law of relation."

The examination of treasures was performed in perfect taste in a quiet room, austere but daintily decorated. I sat beside the Connoisseur on a low couch in front of the window. In front of us, a few feet away, stood a Chinese Chippendale table; in the doorway hovered an expert attendant. The Connoisseur would say to him—"The turquoise T'ang blue jar," or "The ovoid green vase." Then we would wait quietly.

When the Connoisseur mentions the name of a rare object, the attendant retires for a few minutes, then returns bearing the precious thing, and places it reverently upon the table. We look in silence, then the Connoisseur makes a few remarks as to date, locality and history, and I interject comments of admiration or purrs of approval.

Thus two hours passed, and I had seen among other rarities a B. C. pottery dog, iridescent green, giving the elusive "dog-giness of the dog" that the post-impressionist modelers of to-day strive so hard to suggest; a blue jar and a green vase, made about the year 800, wonderful examples of early pottery, opalescent, shimmering gold and silver. These are Primitives. To connoisseurs they are very desirable, for in ceramics, as in painting, this is the day of the Primitives. I saw a won-

derful Persian vase, Thirteenth or early Fourteenth Century, of a deep sapphire blue, originally gilded, now glistening with silver through being buried for ages in the earth below the city of Rhages—a magnificent object, looking like some rich and stormy dawn, bearing on its zones, in wild, rhythmic relief, musicians, animals, huntsmen, shrubs and opening buds.

"Shows Chinese influence," said the Connoisseur, "some time after the Mongolian invasion in the Thirteenth Century. I know of only two other specimens."

And, closing my eyes, I saw in a vision the artistic impulse of the Chinese filtrating through Asia, for I realized that Persia, by herself, could never have designed, painted, and fired this superb vase; Persia gave to the world lovely luster tiles, but she did not soar into the complexities of beauty like China; I saw the caravans trading between China and the Roman Empire, crossing vast deserts and immense mountain ranges, taking two years on the circuit; I saw some clever Chinese craftsman left behind at Rhages showing the Persians how to make this wonderful vase. "Thus we do it," and thus surely was produced this Persian grandparent of the perfect Chinese pottery that was to follow later, perfect with the perfection of Raphael—ripe performance, adventurous promise gone.

Opening my eyes, I saw that another piece had been placed upon the table—a noble Chinese beaker, circa Seventeenth Century, green and white, the green being a tree that climbs boldly up the black ground, the white being the dominating guelder roses that push gallantly out of the lovely green—a virile piece, a masculine piece. By its side was the most beautiful quadrangular vase that I had ever seen, brodered in flowers, sophisticated, exquisite—a dainty piece—a feminine piece. And just behind was a child

vase, beautiful, green and white, with an amusing dragon clambering over it.

I smiled to myself. "I begin to relate them to life," I said. "Here are Papa, Mamma and the Baby, and that Persian vase is of course Grandpapa!"

Can you wonder that, having the clew, I should pursue it through the afternoon. Soon, very soon, another family presented itself to me, a much earlier family, which I called the Family of Promise, and the other, the Family of Performance. Soon, very soon, the children of the earlier family intrigued themselves into my affection. They were, of course, those three lovely little bowls, ripe red, sky blue and creamy bronze—tea bowls, or what you will, tea bowls for a Chinese exquisite to whom tea drinking was a ritual, who sipped from them some 800 years ago. And the babies of this First Family? There was no doubt about them. Tiny, gay, begging to be taken up and fondled, were the two Prunus boxes, each one inch high, born about 850 A. D.

I was quite pleased with the afternoon. Here in tabular form, is the pedigree of these two art families—a homage to China:

THE FAMILY OF PROMISE

Papa (a blue jar)	say 800 A. D.
Mamma (a green vase)	say 800 A. D.
Babies (two, 1 in. high, Prunus boxes)	say 850 A. D.
Elder Children (three tea bowls)	say 1100 A. D.

THE FAMILY OF PERFORMANCE

Grandpapa (Persian vase)	say 1300 A. D.
Papa (beaker)	say 1650 A. D.
Mamma (flower brodered vase)	say 1650 A. D.
And the Baby (green and white dragon vase)	say 1700 A. D.

And watching over these two art families, proclaiming them and protecting them through the centuries, is that B. C. dog, sturdy, with curled tail, cocked ears,

wide open eyes, raised head and barking violently. He is saying: "Rouse yourselves! Be interested! Have visions! So live, as I live—through art!"

* * * *

What? Never see this collection again? I could not help paying it a second visit. On the table were two pieces that I made up my mind to understand, and to understand by handling them, holding them to the light, passing the fingers over the surface, patting and caressing them. That is the only way to understand ceramics.

One was a bowl, the colour of a red plum, an exquisite thing covered on the outside and the inside with a deep red glaze, and flushed with purple; the other was a statue 6 inches high of Daruma, he who founded the Zen sect of Buddhism. The figure is of greyish buff porcellaneous stoneware covered with a thick transparent yellowish glaze, under which is a creamy slip—a strange figure, yet a beautiful figure, beautiful by reason of the extraordinary delicacy of the workmanship.

And facing me in an alcove on a pedestal was a figure, seated, of wood, a Goddess of Mercy, once polychrome and gilded, stranger, odder, and more wonderful than ever now that the vicissitudes of 1200 years have swept it; and on one side of this seated figure was a bronze head, faintly smiling, and on the other side a stone head, faintly smiling, as if exultant of the message they offer to a warring world, eternal repose, eternal promise, the undying message of art—China's whiff of sanity to the materialism of the western world.

"All passes. Art alone
Enduring stays to us:
The Bust out-lasts the Throne,
The Coin, Tiberius."



Courtesy of Parish-Watson & Co., New York

STATUE OF DARUMA
TZ'Ū CHOU WARE-SUNG DYNASTY